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ABSTRACT

Potential promises and problems in the placing of children with special needs or handicaps in the regular classroom are examined in this document. The history of mainstreaming, its rationale, and generally accepted definition are outlined. The focus of this report is upon the role of the teacher union in the complex requirements involved in mainstreaming. The positions adopted by the American Federation of Teachers and other educational groups are presented. It is pointed out that the best interests of the children who are placed in regular classrooms despite handicaps are best served when teachers are fully prepared and understand their obligations, responsibilities, and reliable sources of support. (JD)

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MAINSTREAMING

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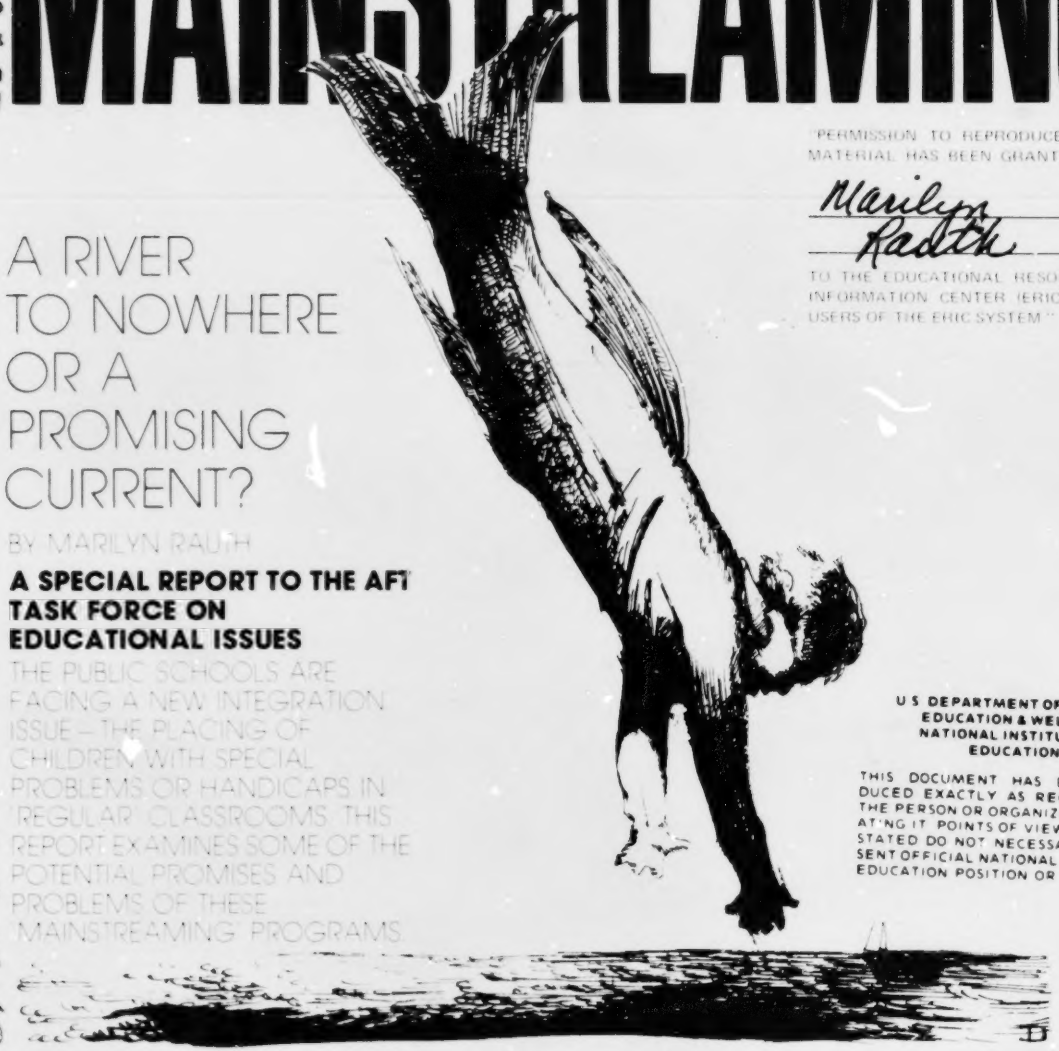
A RIVER TO NOWHERE OR A PROMISING CURRENT?



BY MARILYN RAUTH

A SPECIAL REPORT TO THE AFT TASK FORCE ON EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE FACING A NEW INTEGRATION ISSUE—THE PLACING OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL PROBLEMS OR HANDICAPS IN "REGULAR" CLASSROOMS. THIS REPORT EXAMINES SOME OF THE POTENTIAL PROMISES AND PROBLEMS OF THESE "MAINSTREAMING" PROGRAMS.

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MAINSTREAMING

A RIVER TO NOWHERE OR A PROMISING CURRENT?

Special education is being ushered out of the schoolroom shadows and into the spotlight of educational awareness. The growing consciousness that there are children with special needs has generated concerns among teachers and parents about the traditional methods of dealing with the "special" student both in and out of the schools.

The idea of mainstreaming is becoming a popular theme in the literature and discussions around this issue. As might be expected, mainstreaming has accumulated many definitions—ranging from putting all exceptional children into classrooms with no additional supportive services to integration of only a few in some extracurricular school activities.

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A meaningful definition lies somewhere in between. In the November, 1973, issue of Exceptional Children, published by the Council for Exceptional Children, the basic intent of the concept is lucidly explained. According to the Council:

Mainstreaming is:

☐ Providing the most appropriate education for each child in the least restrictive setting.

☐ Looking at the educational needs of children instead of clinical or diagnostic labels such as mentally handicapped, learning disabled, physically handicapped, hearing impaired, or gifted.

☐ Looking for and creating alternatives that will help general educators serve children with learning or adjustment problems in the regular setting. Some approaches being used to help achieve this are consulting teachers, methods and materials specialists, itinerant teachers, and resource-room teachers.

☐ Uniting the skills of general education and special education so that all children may have equal educational opportunity.

Mainstreaming is not:

☐ Wholesale return of all exceptional children in special classes to regular classes.

☐ Permitting children with special needs to remain in regular

classrooms without the support services that they need.

☐ Ignoring the need of some children for a more specialized program than can be provided in the general education program.

☐ Less costly than serving children in special self-contained classrooms.

Inherent in mainstreaming, therefore, is the idea that exceptional children be placed in the least restrictive environment suited to their capabilities which most closely approximates "normal" situations. It is not a device to cut corners or budgets, although some school administrators will undoubtedly use it as such.

THE HISTORY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

The exceptional child is defined by Samuel Kirk as "the child who deviates from the normal or average child (1) in mental characteristics, (2) in sensory abilities, (3) in neuromuscular or physical characteristics, (4) in social or emotional behavior, (5) in communication abilities, or (6) in multiple handicaps to such an extent that he or she requires a modification of school practices, or special education services, in order to develop to his or her maximum capacity."

The present concept of mainstreaming and the expansion of the definition of exceptional children evolved slowly over more than a century. Efforts to provide special education originated around the same time that the movement for free universal public education began, in the 19th Century. The special-education movement, however, was separate and much more limited. State institutions were established for the training and care of the deaf and blind and for the profoundly handicapped or retarded who were labeled "idiots" and "imbeciles." The needs of many children who were less severely handicapped were totally ignored because they did not qualify for state institutions and were not provided for in the public-education system.

By 1925, however, psychologists had begun to classify children according to their ability to learn rather than their chronological age; educators had begun to recognize that the mentally retarded could benefit from academic training as well as motor training; and public-school programs for exceptional children had begun to replace institutional care, particularly in the larger cities.

The creation of separate classes or schools for the physically and mentally handicapped within public education was lauded as a major advance in special education. This trend has continued in the public schools to the present day. Lately, however, the following aspects of special education have come under attack:

1. The segregation of exceptional children from regular classrooms and activities;
2. The failure to meet the needs of some exceptional children in special classes (e.g. some of the gifted and the emotionally disturbed);
3. The failure to serve a large proportion of the population with special needs;
4. Poor or improper diagnosis techniques and placement reevaluation which resulted in the mislabeling of children, the misuse of special-education classrooms for racial or ethnic segregation and discipline problems, and the confinement of children to "dead-end" educations.

The schools must bear some responsibility for the last charge and act, where necessary, to improve diagnostic and placement procedures. Although our knowledge of diagnostic techniques and treatment still is quite limited in many areas, we do know that abuses exist. The fault lies with administrators who assign personnel to counseling and diagnostic positions for which they have not been trained.

For example, recent civil-rights cases have brought to light the fact that black, Mexican-American, and Native-American children in some instances have been mislabeled as mentally retarded simply on the basis of cultural differences. In landmark cases in several states, the courts have ruled that standardized achievement and intelligence tests discriminate against the culturally and socio-economically disadvantaged child and consequently have prohibited the use of such tests as the sole basis for placement decisions. Litigation in 1970 in California, for example, was based on a case in which an elementary student scored only 30 on a school-administered intelligence test. The same student, however, when given the Spanish version of

this test by an outside bilingual psychologist scored 49 points higher, four points above the cut-off for classification as educable mentally retarded. Subsequently, random testing of eight other Mexican-American children in EMR classes who spoke Spanish in their homes revealed that all but one had been mislabeled. In 1969, Sunflower County, Mississippi used the California Test of Basic Skills to place students in various schools in response to the Supreme Court mandate for integration. The result was that all white children and 38 black children ranked in the top quarter and were placed in three schools. Assignments to five other schools included the remaining 4,100 black children (and no white children) who tested out in the lower three-quarters.

A series of articles in the Gainesville Sun in March, 1976 revealed that of the 641 children enrolled in classes for the educable mentally retarded (EMR) in Alachua County, Florida, 534 were black. James Longstreth, superintendent of schools in the county, noted that "although EMRs are different from culturally disadvantaged students, they test out just the same." One apparent difference is that the culturally disadvantaged children can function effectively on their own in the community whereas the truly mentally retarded child cannot. Studies also have shown that minorities and the poor are placed in classes for the mentally retarded in a greater percentage than chance would dictate. Obviously, the diagnosis of children solely on the basis of intelligence test scores with no attention given to adaptive behavior and individual needs and differences must be discontinued. Too often children have been mislabeled as mentally retarded when, in fact, their problems stem from deficiencies in their backgrounds or from physical or psychological impairments.

The fact that only an estimated 10 percent of the children assigned to special classes are ever returned to the regular classroom has led many educators to demand that programs be adapted to individual learning needs and that there be regular evaluations of progress. Such an approach could result in a greater percentage of reintegration with "normal" classes.

SOCIETY'S CHILDREN

The primary responsibility for the situations described in the three remaining allegations rests with society. In spite of the fact that a wide range of "normalcy" exists, those who fall outside this spectrum traditionally have been stigmatized. Society has always tended to shun those who are "different." The separate system of special education within the public school developed partially because of this societal view and partially in spite of it. The schools, actually, should be praised as the one public institution which opened its doors to exceptional children and provided specialized services.

William C. Greer, executive director of the Council for Exceptional Children, wrote in the June, 1975, issue of American Education that there are an estimated 7 million exceptional children in the U.S.—some 10 to 12 percent of the overall school-age population—plus another million preschoolers. "During the last five years the number of handicapped children receiving effective special-education services has climbed from 2.1 million to nearly three million," he states. "That, nevertheless, leaves another 3 million or so who are receiving considerably less than an adequate education and 1 million who are denied access to a free public education altogether."

Increasingly, courts are ruling that the right to public education must be afforded to all children, including those with special needs. These decisions raise several questions. Should the schools be commended or denounced for continually expanding their services to exceptional children, even though total inclusion has not yet been achieved? Should schools be blamed for inadequate personnel and programs to meet all special needs when society has not provided the necessary funds? The schools have no need to be the sole apologists. The post-war baby boom years made it impossible for schools to expand services when there were too few teachers and too little space even for traditional programs. An overall view of special education would show that dedicated teachers and auxiliary personnel have contributed to students' progress insofar as funding

and knowledge allowed.

That there is a paucity of research on education of the handicapped—and mainstreaming in particular—is shown in a study done by Wynne Associates in January, 1975, for the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH). Though only a few progressive educators advocated mainstreaming in the 1940s, Lloyd Dunn's article in 1968 questioning the effectiveness of special classes for the mildly retarded caused the issue to resurface.

Unlike the '40s, Dunn found the majority of educators agreed with his position. The BEH study, however, points out that the research on mainstreaming "suffers from methodological problems that render much of it virtually useless" and that "most of the views about mainstreaming held by its proponents are based on philosophical and political considerations rather than hard data." It goes on to say:

> At best, the research evidence suggests that a mainstream setting is at least as beneficial to mildly handicapped children [predominantly educable mentally retarded children] as a self-contained classroom.
>
> It is important to emphasize that research into these issues has not been able to substantiate conclusively that mainstreaming is a 'good thing.'

THE UNION'S ROLE IN MAINSTREAMING

Research, therefore, points us in the direction of mainstreaming but advises due caution before the "hard facts" are in. The positions adopted by the American Federation of Teachers and other educational groups follow this line of reasoning, supporting mainstreaming but recommending protective measures against its misuse.

The AFT, for example, passed a resolution at its 1975 convention which (1) supports mainstreaming for handicapped children, both moderate and severe, to the degree recommended by the psychologist, special-education teacher, administrator, and classroom teacher; (2) encourages locals to promote federal funding of special-education programs to provide mainstream settings, to train additional special-education personnel, and to provide necessary support services for mainstreaming programs; and (3) urges that collective-bargaining agreements include adequate provisions for viable class size and protection against diminution of special certificates or licenses of both special education and regular teachers in the implementation of mainstreaming.

In response to specific local situations, AFT affiliates have developed their own positions on mainstreaming in many cases.

The Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, for example, included a mainstreaming provision in its contract as early as 1970. Its 1976 contract provides for special classes but also states:

> Educable-retarded, visually handicapped, hearing-handicapped, socially and emotionally disturbed, and brain-injured students should be integrated with regular students in both academic and nonacademic classes. No more than five students shall normally be assigned as part of any one of these classes and in no event shall more than six such students be so assigned. Integration into regular mainstream classes, particularly academic classes, shall be based on pupil readiness as determined by the appropriate special-education program supervisor and the appropriate special-education teacher.

The contract also requires that continuing efforts be made to locate special-education classrooms in the mainstream area of school and to provide psychiatric-consultation services on a regular basis for use by teachers of socially and emotionally disturbed students. The Pittsburgh local reports its mainstreaming effort to be successful because regular teachers receive a great deal of supportive help.

The Mainstreaming Committee of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2, New York City, recommended in a December, 1975, report that the UFT continue to support its negotiating demand that a mainstreamed class be no larger than that of the special-education class from which the child came and that, in this situation, the number of special-education children not exceed 10 percent of the class size. This limitation of maximum class size, in addition to adequate supportive services, they felt, would assure a sound educational program for all pupils in a mainstreamed program. The report also calls attention to the fact that (1) not all children benefit from mainstreaming; (2) mainstreaming used to reduce the number of special-education teachers in order to cut costs is

injurious to the child; (3) regular teachers should be informed of special placements in their classes, and consent to them; and (4) regular teachers must be given the opportunity to consult with special-education teachers on the needs and capabilities of handicapped children and be offered continuous supportive services.

Because of the fiscal crisis in New York City, however, the committee concluded that "to mainstream without the necessary financial resources would add to the educational loss that the normal child, as well as the handicapped youngster, are now suffering and would compound the problems that teachers and schools are currently facing." Its opinion was that until fiscal restraints are alleviated, "mainstreaming should not be expanded beyond what is currently practiced in the school system and class-size limits should be imposed and adequate supportive assistance provided in all ongoing mainstreaming programs."

A joint committee of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 231, and the Detroit school board reviewed the matter of parttime regular experiences for special-education students. It recommended that since the policy has been to encourage involvement of special-education students in the regular program, where possible and when in the best interest of the pupil, they would support efforts to "continue and expand such programming whenever it is in the best interest of the special-education pupil. Program decisions would be based jointly on information provided by the principal, special-education teacher, regular teacher, and parent. In addition to class assignments, they may involve regular contact during lunch periods, school trips, auditorium programs, summer programs, etc."

The Chicago Teachers Union, AFT Local 1, prepared a position paper on mainstreaming stating that in theory it approves of "the concept of selective placement of students in a mainstream setting but oppose the current practices of phasing out self-contained divisions, abuses of resource classrooms and threat of displacement of EMH teachers by this practice." The statement further notes that specialized assistance must be available to regular teachers; that staff development is required to prepare regular teachers; and that adequate facilties, classrooms, and personnel are needed to assure individualized instruction and upward movement for exceptional children.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 3, supports mainstreaming but has suggested protective clauses for upcoming contract negotiations. These include the requirements that regular teachers be informed of placements of exceptional children in their classrooms and of their specific disabilities and that supportive services and personnel, such as nonteaching assistants, paraprofessionals, counselors, and psychiatrists, be available where needed.

The innovative "Master Plan for Special Education" in California incorporates many good ideas, but problems have already developed in implementation, according to an article by special-education teacher Cheryl Hoffman in the February California Teacher. The problems include improper utilization of personnel, superfluous administrative positions, changes in teacher qualifications and credentialing, and establishing new catch-all learning-handicapped classes with maximum class sizes higher than classes from which children came. The article points out that under the plan students can be served by special-education only when "modification of the regular program" has not sufficiently met their needs. Hoffman warns:

> A major goal of the Master Plan is to keep or return every child to the regular education program as soon as possible. Special education does not supplant, but is in addition to, regular education. Obviously if that is to be the case, special education funds will have to be used to release, train, and help volunteer regular teachers make the required accommodations. Without such funding and support, 'modification of the regular school program' will remain a concept on paper only.

PROBLEMS AND PROMISES

These instances are typical of a cautious acceptance of mainstreaming across the country. They tend to reflect teachers' desires to see exceptional children receive the best education possible in the most suitable and least restrictive environment.

Yet, problems do exist. Some school administrators see mainstreaming primarily as a way to cut costs. In these cases, all or most special-education students have been placed in regular classrooms with no provissions for support services, individualized instruction, or teacher and student preparation. High class sizes go even higher. Discipline problems develop. Sometimes teacher workloads increase because of extensive paperwork required for special progress reports. Regular education suffers and exceptional children find themselves in embarrassing and frustrating situations.

Already reports are coming in that some school systems, under the guise of mainstreaming, are irresponsibly attempting to fire special teachers and eliminate all special classes. Another abuse often cited is the transfer of special-education students to regular classrooms without any provision for proper transitional periods or inservice training for regular teachers. Furthermore, monies targeted for special-education, in some cases, are no longer following the child but are being diverted into school systems' general funds.

Mainstreaming designed to benefit the child cannot possibly bring short-term cost savings. On the contrary, immediate expenditures will increase, although long-range savings will be realized. For example, research has shown that many deficiencies if caught early can be totally or partially alleviated. This fact reemphasizes the need for early screening, diagnosis, and treatment, as advocated in AFT's program for public-school administration of early childhood services. Mainstreaming also has the potential to decrease institutional costs which ultimately will save the public millions of dollars.

School systems which seek to implement mainstreaming should consider these guidelines:

1. Not all children benefit from a mainstream setting.

2. Placement of exceptional children in regular classes and activties should be decided on an individual basis, based on the readiness of the special student and the preparedness of the regular classroom to meet individual children's special needs.

3. Regular teachers should be informed of all special placements in their classes.

4. Staff-development programs to prepare regular teachers to work with exceptional students must be available prior to such placements, and continuous support and training are necessary to meet problems as they arise.

5. Regular teachers should be involved in placement decisions to assure acceptance of the exceptional child in the regular classroom and to evaluate the capability of the regular classroom to accommodate special needs.

6. Transitional periods are often necessary to prepare both exceptional and regular students to adjust to new situations.

7. Class sizes must be kept low in mainstreamed situations to assure the necessary individualization of instruction. (As the exceptional child is likely to require more of the teacher's time than other students, teacher-student ratios may be adjusted to weight the special student more heavily, or they may conform to those classes from which the special student is transferred.)

8. It is imperative that certified special-education teachers be retained to continue to meet the needs of children in special classes and to work with regular teachers in developing appropriate instructional programs for mainstreamed children.

9. Counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and other auxiliary personnel must be readily available to special and regular teachers if mainstreaming is to be successful.

10. Teachers should have regularly scheduled release time for consultations with support personnel.

11. Instructional materials, equipment, and facilties must be adapted to the needs of exceptional children in the regular classroom and throughout the school.

12. Scheduling should conform to the needs of exceptional children rather than vice-versa.

13. Evaluations of student progress and placement should be carefully done on a continuous basis.

14. Safeguards should exist to see that funds designated for special-education follow the child, even if in a mainstreamed setting.

Many advocates see mainstreaming as a way of eliminating the labeling of children. Certainly, all would agree that no child should be subjected to negative stigmatization. At issue is what represents the best way of realizing this goal. Perhaps our emphasis should be on encouraging an understanding of handicaps as accepted individual differences rather than on trying to ignore them altogether. A greater effort should also be made to see that labeling, where necessary, conforms to learning needs, rather than to general handicapping conditions.

Sally Rogow and Charlotte David, editors of the April, 1974, issue of Phi Delta Kappan which was devoted to special education, commented in their guest editorial:

> A tendency to avoid labeling altogether also has its pitfalls. The integration of the exceptional child into the mainstream of education is generally a very good development. This means that mildly retarded children, and those requiring additional support in order to function within a normal classroom with their peers, are more [illegible] more to be given opportunities to do so. But enthusiasm for the integration concept brings with it the trend to eliminate self-contained special education classrooms. This can be destructive. It can mean that many children will be denied any school experience. We are speaking here of the child who is unable to cope with the distraction and the pressure of the normal class.

An additional problem accompanying mainstreaming and the possible limitations on labeling is how to maintain additional funds needed for special-education now provided through categorical aid programs.

BEWARE THE UNDERTOW

In addition to mandates for mainstreaming in state legislation, eligibility for funds under the federal "Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975" is partially based on the establishment by states of "procedures to assure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children . . . are educated with children who are not handicapped, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of handicapped children from the regular educational environment occures only when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily."

The concept of mainstreaming is, therefore, with us. While it offers some promises and hopes, we must be careful not to get caught in the undertow. The danger exists that exceptional children could become lost in a large, impersonal classroom if mainstreaming is seen as a cost-cutting device.

In the final analysis, teachers must concern themselves with what is best for individual children.

Integration in the regular classroom will be beneficial to some exceptional children and will allow them to live fuller, more normal lives. Yet it is important not to be carried away by idealism. Those who advocate abolishing special-education classes, regional resource centers, and residential institutions altogether ignore many realities.

Some conditions require specialized services beyond the capabilities of the regular classroom. In addition, schools must consider the immaturity of children when making placement decisions. We have all seen instances of children's cruelty to one another—ridicule of the fat child, the thin child, the slow child, the bright child. This list could be greatly expanded. Although this kind of treatment is occasioned by other children's insensitivities and insecurities, rather than by maliciousness, the harmful effect on the targeted child is nonetheless very real. Close attention must therefore be given to the acceptance of the exceptional child by other children. Though from an adult perspective we like to believe we can somehow prevent such mistreatment, the fact is that some of it often remains beyond our control.

It is not enough to consider only what we would like to believe would be best for the individual child. If mainstreaming is not to become a passing fad, all factors which might affect the child's development —intellectual, physical, social, or emotional—must carefully be considered in such decisions.

Teachers should support mainstreaming—but only when it is in the best interest of the child, and only when proper steps have been taken to assure that teachers, students, and the regular classroom all are prepared for meaningful change.